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ABSTRACT

Discontent with public education is feeding a movement to make private education public policy, with potentially disastrous results. Unionization and bureaucratization of the public schools has lessened their effectiveness and disaffected parents feel increasingly that public schools do not offer children social mobility and the opportunity for economic equality. This is particularly true in the case of children at the lower socioeconomic level. Privatization of the schools is not feasible for the urban poor. This concept diverts attention from the basic problems of educating this sizeable group of children. A closer relationship between schooling and active participation in the labor force will make education more relevant to the needs of these students. (SAS)

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The Privatization of Public Education: Implications for Educational Policy

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Throughout their history, public schools have been a constant target of efforts to reform American education. To say that pressures for reform will continue into the 1980s would be a patently obvious statement of little interest to anyone were it not for some troubling and paradoxical directions in recent proposals. Historically, despite strong dissatisfactions with the processes and achievements of America's public schools, reformers have rarely questioned the intrinsic value of public education. Schooling, with all its faults, has been understood to be a collective concern, deserving not only of substantial public funds but also of direct public involvement in its provision. If schools have had problems, these problems have not been seen as a product of the schools' publicness per se, but rather that schools have been given a difficult public charge to address complex social and educational problems.

As we enter the 1980s, there is some evidence that these perceptions are changing. A growing number of people are attributing the failures of public schools to the simple fact that they are public. Hence, several reformers are pressing for a radical change in American education--a public policy that would privatize public education. Public schools, they argue, will do a better job of educating America's children if they became private schools, subject to the rigors of consumer demand and efficiencies imposed by the market. In this paper, we briefly explore this trend. Our basic premise is that these proposals to privatize public education have distressingly negative implications and pose a serious challenge for educational policy.

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Sources of Discontent

In California in late 1979, there are three privatization initiatives--two voucher proposals and one tax credit proposal--seeking signatures to qualify for the June 1980 ballot. If one of the initiatives gains sufficient signatures to qualify for the ballot and then receives a simple majority of votes, any California household will be able to claim as its constitutional right public financial support for private education. Likewise, in the U.S. Congress, the Tuition Tax Relief Bill (S.1095) is due for renewed consideration in 1980. Should it become law, the bill will open the federal coffers to private schools. This push for substantially increased public support for private education is strong, notwithstanding the recent defeat of a voucher proposal in Michigan. Disaffection with the public schools is deeply felt among a growing number of American families, especially middle-class families with the political clout to register their frustration and demand relief. As long as their dissatisfaction continues to grow, the drive toward privatization of public education will be vigorously supported throughout the 1980s. Unfortunately, we are not sanguine that the weakening affection for public education can be easily halted or reversed. The discontent has deep roots, and a number of social developments are likely to exacerbate the frustration.

Probably foremost among the sources of parents dissatisfaction with public schools is a growing sense of powerlessness. Schools seem increasingly impenetrable bastions of a professional education ~~coterie~~ coterie that has been ossified by tenure guarantees, seniority rights, and an endless number of rigid rules governing what teachers teach and how and when they teach it. Despite federal requirements for parent advisory councils and other measures to promote parental involvement in public education, many parents feel incapable of influencing a

school world dominated by union agreements and bureaucratic directives. Thus, "the promise of power to families is a major appeal of the voucher plan. For now, as they watch school administrators and teacher unions wrangle while their children seem forgotten in the fray, parents tend to feel helpless."[1] Private schools seem to offer a world free of strikes, slowdowns, and teacher indifference to parental opinions on what works best for their children.

Fueling these feelings that loss of accountability has been one of the costs of unionization and bureaucratization of the public schools is the more general feeling that schools have simply not delivered what they promised, social mobility and more economic equality. Explanations for this failure depend, in part, on one's political persuasions. Thus, on the left, an increasingly attractive argument holds that public schools actually help to sustain and reproduce inequality by serving as a social sorter that channels large numbers of working class youth into low paying, unsatisfying work while reserving positions of power and reward for the upper class elite.[2] The right, on the other hand, seems to argue that schools fail to do what the left says they have done too well--i.e., to provide students with marketable skills and well developed habits that will enable them to become part of the productive labor force.

Wherever one stands in this debate, there is little doubt that schools have been unable to give large numbers of nonwhite and Hispanic youth access to the primary labor market. For these students, typically trapped in center city schools, there is little relationship between the content of courses offered and the lives they are resigned to live outside the mainstream market economy. Indeed, this frustrating disjuncture between the school curriculum and the realities of the world is probably a major cause of the truancy, vandalism,

and dropping out that have become such disturbing hallmarks of urban school systems. The urban malaise has led some of the nation's leaders to suggest that privatization of education will improve the lot of minority and low-income families. Roy Innis, National Director of the Congress for Racial Equality, has stated: "The rich and the upper middle class in America have always been able to vote with their feet, so to speak, in educational issues. If they don't like the public schools, they simply send their children to private schools and pay the tuition. It is time to give poor minorities the chance to vote with their feet, the chance to use to a greater extent the resources of private education."[3]

Private schools, of course, have been available almost exclusively to the well-to-do, but even among the rich and the upper middle class, voting with one's feet has led relatively infrequently to the doors of a private school. Rather, it has led to suburbia, socially and racially homogenous communities that have been able to establish public schools less troubled by turmoil and and conflict than their urban counterparts. However, this gain in tranquility has costs. To insure control over the suburban school system, it helps to be small. Control over not only schools but also the housing market that regulates access to schools is much easier to maintain in communities of moderate size, and indeed America's most exclusive communities tend also to be among the nation's smallest. Small size, however, poses a major educational problem. With a few exceptions--such as Brookline, Scarsdale, New Trier, and Beverly Hills--small suburban districts cannot sustain an academically varied program. In this regard, cities clearly have the edge. With much larger student bodies, they are able to employ teachers specialized in language, science, and the arts, as well as offer an array of costly services to children with special needs.

Hence, when the middle class placed its bets on surburban schooling, it lost the ability to avail itself of the top range of teachers' intellectual talent. To recoup, many families are now searching for a private alternative, beguiled by the belief that the staffs of private schools are composed of graduates of our best universities and of persons who have majored in the hard disciplines rather than in education. The assessment is, of course, partly accurate, though due probably to these schools' exclusiveness than to the mere fact that they are private.

The ability of many suburban districts to sustain a public school program of high quality has been hindered further by school finance reform and by growing fiscal constraints on the public sector generally. School finance reform has often sought to limit expenditures in high spending districts, many of which are suburban systems with high quality programs that attract the mobile middle class. With limits on spending and rapidly inflating costs, program quality has suffered, and parents are beginning to look for alternatives.

In many regards, urban districts have been even harder hit by school finance reform and fiscal crisis. Popular beliefs aside, urban districts are often high spending districts, and finance reform efforts have been slow to recognize that these higher expenditures usually reflect higher costs and greater concentrations of children with costly special needs. As a result, many urban districts have not benefited from finance reform, and a few cities such as San Francisco and New York have actually been threatened with substantial losses in school revenues. Worsening this plight is the generally deteriorating fiscal condition of many cities faced with abandonment by both industry and middle- and upper-income families, not only to the suburbs but also to other regions of the country.

Nevertheless, some cities appear to be enjoying a renaissance of social and economic activity. Boston, Washington, Chicago, Denver, and San Francisco, to name a few, all report a return of middle class families to some urban neighborhoods. Though dominated by young professional couples who do not yet have school-aged children, there is reason to expect that many intend to stay. With both spouses working, a trend that shows no likelihood of declining soon, commuting long distances is both time consuming and expensive. Costs are further increased by the energy crisis, and the prospect of shortages as well as price increases makes urban living even more attractive. Moreover, these young couples are of a generation that grew up in suburbia and found it wanting. For them, the city is a more intellectually and culturally stimulating place to live than suburbia, and if some of the major problems of urban life can be overcome, they plan to stay.

One of those major problems is schools, and unfortunately the presence of a growing urban middle class is not likely to bode well for the public schools, at least over the next decade. For one thing, their numbers while growing are still small. For another, they are mostly white, and despite growing up in a time of significant progress toward racial equality, many harbor lingering fears of schools and neighborhoods where minorities are the majority. In New York, Washington, D.C., Cleveland, Chicago, Atlanta, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, St. Louis, and a number of other cities, minorities comprise over 80 percent of public school students. Consequently, concerns over racial imbalance, as well as the quality of the school program diminished by fiscal problems, make private alternatives very attractive to these new urban families. Hence, one can expect substantial support for privatization to come from urban centers.

In short, as we enter the 1980s, a number of forces are coalescing support for privatizing education. Taken alone, probably neither unionization, bureaucratization, underemployment, finance reform, fiscal crisis, urban renaissance, nor racial conflict would be sufficient to portend such a change. Together, they greatly increase the likelihood of a successful effort. How should such a prospect be regarded? What are some of the implications of privatization for American education and society at large?

Privatization: Social Choice or Social Triage?

At a time when big government and big corporations dominate more and more aspects of our everyday lives, it is easy to understand the appeal of private schools. The promise of most privatization initiatives is a relatively small personalized school free of the curriculum controls of state bureaucracies and responsive to the concerns of parents and the individual needs and interests of their children. It is a school that can be held accountable or easily abandoned for another if it fails to deliver a sound educational program. It is a school where parents of like mind can organize a curriculum and teaching environment free of the conflict engendered in a school where parents with competing interests are trapped by the administrative boundaries of school attendance areas. It is a school where choice can be exercised freely and responsibly in the best interests of the child--interests determined by those in the best position to judge what they are, the parents. Such is the promise, and were privatization able to accomplish it, one might judge such a change beneficial in a pluralistic society with a strong commitment to individual freedom and responsibility.

We believe, however, the promise is mostly illusory and in being so diverts public attention and energy away from addressing the very serious problems that beset our schools. Although the middle class probably stands to lose little

from privatization, we suspect they will be sorely disappointed in the gains. The elite private schools, which are the models many hope an expanded private system would emulate, are not likely to be any more accessible to middle class families than they are now. If they are eligible for public funds and willing to participate in voucher programs--two events that are by no means certain--they will be so oversubscribed that extremely competitive admission standards or admission by lottery will exclude most students. Most parents will have to choose among newly formed schools with no reputation or record of successful teaching. If experience with private trade schools is any indication, many of these new schools will surely fail as a result of administrative incompetence or fiscal mismanagement, and some few will undoubtedly try to exploit the new market for private education with fly-by-night operations established to turn a quick profit. In either event, parents may find that schooling for their children becomes much more unstable than they had anticipated.

For the poor, consequences may be more serious. For those able to escape the chaos of center city schools, privatization will be seen as beneficial. But they are likely to be few in number. The poor have been concentrated in center city schools in large part because they have also been concentrated in center city neighborhoods. Transportation to schools in better parts of the city or in the suburbs is likely to pose costly and insurmountable barriers for most poor families. Poor parents will face the same problems with organizing or choosing among new schools that are accessible. Additionally, problems of exploitation may be greater for poor families with fewer options about where to live. There is good evidence that for many of the necessities supplied by private markets--food, clothing, housing, furniture, appliances, etc.--the poor pay more, and there is no reason to suspect that private schools would behave differently.

More troubling is the fact that when schools are subjected to competition for students, they will be subjected to intense pressures to demonstrate results of good teaching. Were we able to define and identify good teaching more clearly, this might be a welcome development, but as it is, the easiest way to show evidence of good teaching is to admit only good students. Schools will be very reluctant to admit students who are likely to be poor achievers, create discipline problems, or require costly special services. This disincentive will create problems for rich and poor alike, but the effects are likely to fall disproportionately on minorities and the poor, whose children because of a number of social and economic inequities are more likely to have difficulty achieving in terms of the educational standards determined by the white middle-class majority. Consequently, these children may become increasingly isolated in the public schools that become a dumping ground for underachieving children with serious disadvantages and special needs. Privatization thus becomes a form of social triage, benefiting the middle class and a small number of very ambitious and determined poor families at the expense of a large number of poor and minority children with the greatest educational needs.

This kind of increased social and racial isolation is probably an inevitable consequence of privatization, despite the best intentioned efforts of reforms to prevent it. A commitment to reducing racial and economic inequality requires a social contract, a public commitment. Otherwise, it is in the best interest of everyone acting privately to ignore the issue. Privatization encourages such sentiments. It is no doubt true that in promoting racial and economic equality we have demanded too much of our public schools; barring more sweeping changes in society at large, they simply cannot deliver all that was expected. But that failure does not strike us as sufficient grounds for permitting dissatisfied parents to buy out of the social contract, to purchase

in effect the right to segregate their children and themselves racially and socially. Even in a capitalist society, there are some things that ought not to be for sale.

Implications for Educational Policy

To say that privatization is an undesirable direction for educational change in the 1980s is not to say that all is well with public education, though proponents of vouchers and other schemes may well accuse us of defending the status quo. We do believe that American education is threatened with a crisis; we do not believe it is a crisis of parental choice or the lack of it. What seems to us more serious and far more deserving of public attention are increasing problems in the relationship between education and work. The failure of schools to prepare large numbers of young people for rewarding and productive work is widely recognized and, as we have acknowledged, a major stimulus for privatizing public schools. Much less understood is that this failure of public education results as much from the way work is structured and distributed as from the way schooling is organized and delivered. The problem has several dimensions.

On one level, there is the simple fact that in our present economy there are both good jobs and bad jobs, and the type one gets does not have an especially strong relation to one's educational achievements. If the perceptions of center city youth about the irrelevance of schooling offerings to their lifetime opportunities is not sufficient indication, there is an impressive amount of academic evidence showing that one's social and economic status is best predicted by the socioeconomic status of one's parents. Education has thus far had little impact on this relationship. Despite protestations to the contrary, America is

not a classless society, and that fact is clearly understood by a great number of the nation's young people.

Disenchantment with employment opportunities, however, is not limited to the poor. Among children of the middle class, there is increasing uncertainty about what the future holds and whether schooling bears any relevance to what they will be able and willing to do. Young people are acutely aware of the facelessness of modern corporate society and the growing service sector in which the product is increasingly difficult to identify, much less one's role in producing it. Of course, they have not yet experienced this work world first hand and they undoubtedly harbor misconceptions, but they do experience first hand the effects of that world on their parents. The results are often unpleasant--hypertension, alcoholism, drug abuse, physical violence, financial worries, and divorce.

These anxieties and the resulting ennui is exacerbated by more general uncertainties about one's usefulness. Compared to children of a century ago, today's young people have remarkably few opportunities to participate in any kind of productive activity with clear signals that society values the output. No longer able to help with producing food on the farm or engage in other kinds of household production that made them valuable and valued members of the family, "children are a liability," in the words of one well-known manual on childrearing. There are ample signs that today's young people understand this and resent it but are powerless to do anything about it.

The education crisis, then, is really a crisis in the world of work, and unless educational policy is linked more closely to labor policy, no educational reform is likely to have much impact. It is not possible here to do more than sketch a few ways in which this linkage might be improved. First,

we need to begin exploring ways to distribute work based on one's stage in the life cycle rather than one's position in the social structure. For the next several decades, we will continue to have a large number of relatively unpleasant, monotonous jobs that quickly become unrewarding if performed for long periods of time. With the prospect of change and advancement, few jobs are intrinsically boring and unsatisfying. It is only when the rewards cease and there is no hope of escape that work becomes degrading and futile. A young female soccer player, concerned about staying in shape, might find ditch digging tolerable and possibly enjoyable as long as she knew the work was temporary and might better enable her later on to supervise a construction crew. Similarly, a male high school student might find routine office work a good way to practice for typing college term papers or to prepare for an office management position at some later time.

Second, we need to find ways to involve young people in productive activities early on in their school lives. A good place to start is in the school itself, requiring students to assume responsibility for some of the daily operations--answering telephones, sorting mail, sweeping halls, making repairs, tutoring younger students, and so on. A number of vocational schools operate cafeterias staffed mainly by students, and there is no reason why this could not be common practice in most secondary schools. McDonalds has no doubts about high school students ability to run a restaurant; why should we doubt their ability to run the school cafeteria?

Third, we must give more attention to workers participation in the management of work, decision over what gets produced and how and when it will be done. Again, the school itself is a place to start. In some respects, teachers feel as powerless as parents over the daily routine of the classroom. Rigid schedules, required curricula, inflexible staffing rules, rigid restrictions

on class size, and numerous reporting requirements all impinge on the teacher's own ability to make good, common sense decisions about how best to teach. Nor should such efforts to democratize work be limited to staff; students should be involved as well. This can take two forms. First, students should be expected to participate more actively in the decisions affecting the management of the school. Second, students should be encouraged to develop and operate small-scale school enterprises that experiment with different kinds of decision-making procedures.

Finally, we must find ways to increase the interaction between education and business and labor, while at the same time placing educators on a more equal footing with the private sector. For some time, educators have rather defensively endured the complaints of many business people that schools simply have not been doing the job and therefore ought to be radically restructured. The complaints are not without merit, but it is equally appropriate for educators to make demands of business and labor, arguing that schools can do a better job of educating for work, if work is organized and distributed differently.

This is at best a sketchy outline, but it begins to address what we think should be the major educational concern of the 1980s, the relationship between school and work. The movement for privatization ignores the issue and indeed may aggravate the problem with a false promise. Without addressing the nature of work and the schools' role in preparing students for the work world, privatizing the public schools may lead to the identical set of unproductive and inequitable student outcomes whose only difference is that they are now legitimated behind a thin veil of free choice.

FOOTNOTES

1. Independent and Gazette, (Berkeley, California), p.4, November 7, 1979.

2. See for example, Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, Schooling in Capitalist America, New York: Basic Books, 1976.

3. Independent and Gazette, op. cit.